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President's Memory Fails on SALT II

With a columnist's presumption, I have for 38 years been straightening out presidents and reminding them of facts they would rather forget. I'm happy to provide this unwanted service to President Reagan, whose memory failed him at his last news conference.

He was asked by United Press International's White House correspondent, Helen Thomas, about the unratified SALT II arms control agreement.

"Jack Anderson said in his column today that in 1981 you passed the word to Moscow that, even if the Senate ratified SALT II, you would not sign it," she explained. "Then in 1982, Moscow told you that they are no longer bound by the SALT II treaty, and they began to build up their arsenal over the limit. Is that true?"

"I read that myself this morning," Reagan responded, "and I went into the office and I said, 'Where is all of this coming from?' I do not remember any statement from the Soviet Union of that kind."

I don't blame the president for his confusion. I have read classified documents on the SALT II negotiations. I got lost, too, in the verbiage.

Out of this wilderness, rumors leaked that Reagan reached a secret understanding with the Soviet Union in 1981 and had neglected to mention this to the Senate. Some concerned senators began making discreet inquiries six months ago.

On Feb. 1, the senators got a secret report from the White House confirming the rumors. The document, of course, put the secret accommodation in the most favorable language possible.

It concedes that Reagan notified the Soviet

Union that he would not go ahead with the SALT II treaty, that the Soviets then began building intercontinental missiles as fast as they could, that the Pentagon dismantled old weapons to stay within the limits of the unratified treaty and that this unilateral disarmament was kept secret until senators began demanding answers. The White House encouraged the nation to believe that there was a U.S.-Soviet pact to abide by the treaty.

My associate Dale Van Atta has examined the secret record. To refresh the president's memory, here are some quotes:

■ "In September 1981, the U.S. notified the U.S.S.R. that it would not seek ratification of SALT II, thus relieving both parties under international law of any obligation with respect to the treaty." The treaty would have limited each side to 2,250 "strategic nuclear-delivery vehicles."

By the next June, the Soviets had 2,500 SNDVs. This led to a meeting of then-Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko June 18-19, 1982. The belated report to the Senate confides: "Both sides would abide by SALT II with some exceptions."

■ But, the report complains: "The U.S.S.R. has deployed SNDVs above [the cap] in violation of its political commitment under SALT II. Such activity is indicative of a Soviet policy inconsistent with the political commitment."

Even in this admission to the Senate, the White House played down the Soviet missile spurt. The report states that the Soviets had 2,522 SNDVs by last summer. But top-secret CIA and Pentagon reports put the figure at more than 2,750.